

THE AGE OF REVOLUTION (1750–1914)

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The French Revolution

The ideas of the Enlightenment led to revolutions first in America in 1776 and then in France in 1789. In both cases, the revolutionaries said that they were fighting to regain their natural rights. In France, the society was divided into three estates, or classes. The First Estate was the clergy, the Second Estate was the nobility, and the Third Estate was everyone else—merchants, lawyers, teachers, peasants, etc. The vast majority of people belonged to the Third Estate, yet the First and Second Estates had almost all the political power and wealth, especially in terms of land.

On July 14, 1789, the French people stormed the Bastille, a prison in Paris, and launched the French Revolution. King Louis XVI asked a duke if it was a revolt. “No,” answered the duke, “It’s a revolution.” A revolution is a total change in the way a country is governed. In the beginning, the French Revolution wasn’t particularly violent. Then, in 1792, a group of radicals took over and began the bloody “reign of terror.” The king, his queen, and thousands of others lost their heads to a new device called the *guillotine*. By mid-1794, the leaders of the terror lost popular support and they, too, went to the guillotine.

A new government was set up, but it was weak and corrupt. Then a strong new leader named Napoleon Bonaparte appeared. He took over the government in 1799 and five years later crowned himself emperor. Although Napoleon reformed many aspects of society—adopting a new uniform legal code, improving the school system, etc.—he did great harm as well. His army invaded and conquered most of Europe. Many thousands of people died as a result. To rule these new conquests, Napoleon placed members of his own family on the various thrones. Later, there would be revolts against his foreign rule.

There were two nations, however, that Napoleon couldn’t conquer—Russia and Great Britain. In 1812 Napoleon attacked Russia with an army of 500,000 soldiers. A brutal Russian winter and the stubborn determination of the Russians forced him to retreat with only a small fraction of his army intact. Napoleon’s final defeat came at the hands of the British and their allies in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo. Napoleon was then exiled to St. Helena, a small island in the South Atlantic where he died in 1821.

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The Dynasties of Asia

After 1707, the British gradually replaced the Moguls as the rulers of India. The Mogul Empire was undone by a series of civil wars and religious conflicts with the Hindus. Meanwhile, the British East India Company slowly gained power and even acted as a kind of government in parts of India. Some Indians resented this and rose up in rebellion but they were defeated. By the mid-1800s all of India was under control of the British. In 1877 Queen Victoria of England became the Empress of India. India became the crown jewel of Britain’s colonial empire.

The Moguls, however, left behind one of the most beautiful buildings in the world—the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan had it built with white marble as a tomb for his wife in the city of Agra. Started in 1623, it took 20,000 workers nearly 20 years to finish it. The top of the dome is 243 feet high and can be seen from many miles away.

In Japan, a warrior society emerged in the 12th century. While Japan had an emperor, power rested in the hands of the shogun, or supreme military general. Like Europe, Japan developed a feudal society with its own forms of lords and vassals. The emperor and the shogun were at the top. Just below them came the loyal samurai, who adhered to a strict code of conduct that lasted into the 20th century. All other classes fell below them.

Beginning in the early 17th century, the Japanese deliberately cut themselves off from the rest of the world. No one was allowed to leave Japan and anyone who did was not allowed to return. That changed only when an American sailor named Matthew Perry sailed to Japan in 1853. He greatly impressed the Japanese with his guns and machines. The Japanese, unlike the Chinese, soon decided to adopt some Western ways.

Meanwhile, in China, the Manchu Dynasty replaced the Ming Dynasty in 1644. Before their fall, however, the Mings built the awesome Forbidden City in their new capital city of Beijing. Only members of the royal family and government officials were allowed inside its walls. When Europeans came to China, they won trade concessions from the Chinese and, in the 19th century, gained more and more control over the country. The Chinese, clinging to old traditions and beliefs, were almost powerless to stop this foreign domination.

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Nationalism and the Industrial Revolution

After the Wars of Napoleon, Europe had a few large kingdoms or empires, such as the Kingdom of France and the Austrian Empire, and many small states. Some of the countries that are prominent today didn't even exist in 1815. There was, for example, no Germany or Italy. As the 19th century moved along, a spirit of nationalism developed. People with the same language and culture wanted to have their own country. Germany, however, was just a scattering of many states. Italy was also divided into small states and, even worse, the Italians were ruled by a foreign power—the Austrian Empire.

Germany began to unify under its largest state—Prussia. More and more of the smaller northern German states joined Prussia. A successful war with France in 1870 encouraged the last southern German states to unite with Prussia. Finally, in 1871, the nation of Germany was born with William of Prussia as its emperor. In Italy, after several false starts, the Italians finally defeated Austria on the battlefield, and the modern nation of Italy was born in 1870.

If the 19th century was the age of nationalism, it was also the age of industrialism. James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1769 launched the Industrial Revolution. Previously everything had been done by hand, usually at home. During the 1800s steam-driven machines increasingly did the work once done by human hands. This was especially true in the textile industry. Machines were, however, far too large and expensive to be used at home. So buildings called factories were built to house the machines. This system created a new and modern class of labor—the factory worker. In order to be close to their work, factory workers moved into new cities that sprang up around the factories.

This urbanization changed the face of Europe. In 1800 there were no cities with more than a million people. By 1900, however, there were several European cities with more than a million people. The population of London, for example, exceeded 6 million. This rapid urbanization caused many problems—diseases from

poor sanitation, bad housing, and inadequate police.

Steam also changed how people traveled. Before the invention of the steam engine, the fastest a person could travel over land was on horseback. Someone such as Julius Caesar traveled as fast as, say, George Washington. Steam-powered boats and steam-powered railroads, however, reduced travel time dramatically in the 19th century.

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Imperialism

The British once bragged that the sun never set on the British Empire. That was true in the 1800s and early 1900s. The British Empire spanned the globe. The British had colonies and protectorates in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific region, and in the Americas. So at any given moment, the sun was already high in the sky shining on one or more of these possessions. The empire included India, “the crown jewel of the Empire,” Australia, Hong Kong, Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa, among others.

Other European nations tried to keep pace with Britain. These nations, too, thought that having colonies added to their national strength. So they developed colonization policies of their own. France, for example, established protectorates in Cambodia, Laos, and in northern and central Vietnam. It turned southern Vietnam into a colony. France also had colonies in Africa and South America. Portugal had colonies in Africa and China. Even the Netherlands had colonies in Africa and South America as well as the West and East Indies. New nations, such as Germany and Italy, joined the race by establishing colonies in Africa.

The imperialism of Europe was made possible by its industrial strength. Europeans could dominate native peoples because the European countries were economically and militarily so much stronger. The one great exception to this rule was Japan. Because the Japanese so quickly adopted certain Western ways, they became strong enough militarily to defeat Russia in a war in 1905. Japan even became an imperial power in its own right, taking over Taiwan and Korea.

Between 1870 and 1914 the European colonial race often led to conflict among the Europeans themselves. In South Africa, for example, the British fought Dutch settlers, called the Boers. The Boer War (1899–1902) ended in a British victory.

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